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Reflection of the Pre-Zoroastrian Faith in the Material Culture of Central Asia

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Abstract:

The article examines the reflection of the pre-Zoroastrian religion of Devayasma in the material culture of the ancient population of Central Asia. The idea has been discussed that the images of the seals and amulets of the Oxus civilization, especially snakes and mythical creatures, are images of daevas.

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Information about the pre-Zoroastrian faith of Central Asia has been studied mainly on the basis of temples of the Bronze Age, burial structures, seals and amulets. In particular, the study of large temples concentrated in the sites of Dzharkutan, Dashtli, Togolok, Kutlugdepe, Keleli and Gonur enriched information about the ancient religious beliefs of Central Asia*. Although these huge temples are expressions of a centralized religion, the doctrine and the name of its deities continue to be a subject of controversy among researchers.

Zoroastrianism is known to be the oldest known religion in Central Asia, and earlier beliefs are tentatively named by researchers. For example, V.I. Sarianidi, on the basis of altars and fine art objects found in the temples of Gonur and Togolok, emphasized that the material culture of the BMAK

* Аскарлов А.А., Ширинов Т.Ш. Ранняя городская культура эпохи бронзы на юге Средней Азии. – Самарканд, 1993. – 162 с.

belonged to the Indo-Iranians, and considered Margiyan to be the birthplace of proto-Zoroastrianism[†]. The ideas of Sarianides about the name of the pre-Zoroastrian doctrine "proto-Zoroastrianism" were the cause of discussion and criticism[‡].

This term was also used by T.Sh. Shirinov that the temples of Dzharkutan, Togolok 21, Gonur-depe, Dashtli were proto-Zoroastrian temples, given that they consisted of wells and ponds, special structures for making intoxicating drinks (khaoma), altars and ash pans[§]. According to T.Sh. Shirinov, the temples of Togolok 21 and Dzharkutan are Indo-Iranian temples, with Togolok 21 dedicated to haoma, while the Dzharkutan temple is dedicated to fire^{**}.

It should be noted that the temples and burials of the Late Bronze Age of Central Asia are important for understanding pre-Zoroastrian beliefs and mythology. However, this topic is covered in relatively more detail in the seals and amulets of the Oxus civilization. In particular, an important research work in this area is considered to be the scientific publication of V. I. Sarianidi, which embodied about 2000 Margian and Bactrian seals and amulets collected from archaeological excavations and chance finds, museum exhibits and private collections^{††}.

Among the images on the amulets and seals of the Oxus civilization, groups of snakes and eagles are of particular importance^{‡‡}. In mythology and religious ideas of the peoples of Central Asia, eagles were considered symbols of strength, power and divinity. The image of a snake in the mythology of almost all peoples personified fertility, earth, female creative power, water, rain, fire (especially heavenly fire) and genealog^{§§}. The image of the snake did not represent a single entity for the peoples of Central Asia.

Since the Bronze Age, group images of snakes indicate that the image of a snake in Central Asia began to express wider symbolic meanings than fertility^{***}. For example, on one of the seals of Sopollitep, four snakes are depicted on one side, and a mountain goat, a wild boar, a tiger and a forest cat on the other^{†††}.

Researchers have interpreted his snakes as a symbol of the rulers of the world^{†††}. In the monuments of the Sapallin culture, there are many images of the image of a snake with horns and hair, and it is noted that in addition to domination, they also denote the spirit of the ancestors and the kingdom of the

[†] Сарианиди В.И. Археологические доказательства протозороастризма в Бактрии и Маргиане // Труды Маргианской археологической экспедиции. Том 2 / Гл. ред. В.И. Сарианиди – М.: Старый сад, 2008 – 9-27.

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[§] Аскарлов А.А., Ширинов Т.Ш. Ранняя городская культура эпохи бронзы юга Средней Азии. – Самарканд, ИА АН РУз., 1993. – 162 с.

^{**} Ширинов Т.Ш. Ранняя городская культура эпохи бронзы юга Узбекистана. – Самарканд. 1993. – С. 198; Сарианиди В.И. Древности страны Маргуш. Ашхабад. "Илим". – 1990. С. 159-165.

^{††} Sarianidi V.I. Myths of Ancient Bactria and Margiana on its Seals and Amulets. – М.: Pentagrapic, 1998. – 336 P.; Антонова Е.В. Драконы «цивилизации Окса». – ВДИ, 2004, № 1. – С. 76.

^{‡‡} Антонова Е.В. «Змея» и «орел» в «цивилизации Окса». – ВДИ, 2000, № 2. – С. 46-52.

^{§§} Иванов В.В. Змея // МНМ. Том 1. – М.: Советская Энциклопедия. 1991. – С. 468.

^{***} Sarianidi V.I. Myths of Ancient Bactria and Margiana on its Seals and Amulets. – М.: Pentagrapic, 1998. – P. 22

^{†††} Аскарлов А.А. Древнеземледельческая культура эпохи бронзы юга Узбекистана. Ташкент: Фан, 1977. – С. 78. табл. XLIV. Рис. 3.

^{†††} Антонова Е.В. Очерки культуры древних земледельцев Передней и Средней Азии. – М., 1984. – С. 150.

dead^{§§§}. It can be assumed that the snakes are depicted in groups, their number has a symbolic meaning. Images of two, three, and especially four snakes together are common.

In the art of the Late Bronze Age of Central Asia, snakes became symbols of evil forces. This state is clearly seen in the images of a man with a snake and a dog^{****}. The depiction of a man leading a dog with a snake wrapped around his legs on an amulet found at Sopollitpepa is interpreted as a dog warning people of danger, or a man helping a dog in distress^{††††}. In our opinion, this scene has a religious essence. Given that the snake is associated with the realm of the dead and is a symbol of evil, the meaning of the image corresponds to the rite of burial of the dead in Videvdāt.

Also, the battle of the serpent-dragon and eagle-like anthropomorphic figures largely corresponds to the idea of the battle of good and evil in the texts of the Avesta. On the amulets and seals of the Oxus civilization, images of snake-like figures in an aggressive position expressed the same essence of Srivar (Servar), Gandarev (Gandharva), Aji-Dahaka (Azi-Dahaki) in the Avesta. For example, the image of an animal in the form of a winged lion devouring a bull resembles the dragon Shrivara (Saurva), who completely devours people and horses in Avestan yashts. This depiction also indicates that it is a pre-Zoroastrian image, as is Aji Dahaka^{*****}.

On one of the amulets kept in the collection of the Louvre Museum, only a head with flowing hair and a beard and large eyes is depicted, and on the reverse side a dragon is of great importance in studying the essence of the image of snakes and snake-like people. G. Azarpay interpreted it as the first image of Aji Dahak, descended from the Indo-Iranian drought demon, and dated the image to 2100-1800. BC^{§§§§}. In the same way, the image of a man with serpentine arms and a bull's head was painted by V.I. Sarianidi also compared Aji Dahaka. In his opinion, Aji Dahaka was a widespread, well-formed image among the Bactrian and Margian Indo-Iranians before Zoroastrianism^{*****}.

According to R.H.Sulaimanov, Adji Dahak was a deity of Saks of Eastern Turkestan, a companion of the water deity Ardisura Anahita before Zoroastrianism, a being representing a water cult in the Caspian, Volga, Aral, Amudarya and Syrdarya regions, and the source of origin with this name are the toponyms Astrakhan and Astrobād^{†††††}. A researcher who associated the name of Aji Dahak with the word "azhdar" - "astar", i.e. "bottom, bottom", noted that this image was imagined as an underground representative of the deities of heaven and water. Although the image of Ardisura Anahita is accepted in the Zoroastrian pantheon in an adapted form, her constant companions Aji-Dahak, the snake, the frog and the water turtle are condemned and rejected among the temples.

On the seals and amulets of the Ox civilization anthropomorphic deities are usually depicted as eagles in a favorable position in relation to humans, but as ruthless fighters with snakes and dragons. One of

§§§ Шайдуллаев А.Ш. Сополли маданияти сфрагистикаси ва глиптикаси. Археология бўйича фалсафа доктори (PhD) диссертацияси матни. – Самарканд, 2018. – Б. 109.

**** Аскарлов А.А. Древнеземледельческая культура эпохи бронзы юга Узбекистана. Ташкент: "Фан". 1977. – С. 209. – Таб. XLV, рис. 3.

†††† Шайдуллаев А.Ш. Сополли маданияти муҳр-тамғалари типологияси // Ўзбекистон тарихининг долзарб масалаларини ўрганишда ёшларнинг ўрни. – Самарканд. ЎЗР ФА Археология институти, № 2 (7). 2013. – С. 95.

†††† Sarianidi V.I. Myths of Ancient Bactria and Margiana on its Seals and Amulets. – M.:Pentagrapic, 1998. – P. 23.

§§§§ Azarpay G. The Snake-Man in the Art of Bronze Age Bactria // Bulletin of the Azian Institute, vol. V, Detroit. 1991. – P. 1-9.

***** Sarianidi V.I. Myths of Ancient Bactria and Margiana on its Seals and Amulets. – M.: Pentagrapic, 1998. – P. 61, fig. 53.

††††† Сулейманов Р.Х. Древний Нахшаб. Проблемы цивилизации Узбекистана VII в. до н. э. – VII в. н. э. Самарканд – Ташкент: Фан, – 2000. С. 279-280.

the mascots depicts the struggle of two pairs of eagles and two pairs of snakes over a human body (corpse). This image perpetuates the passage of the soul of the deceased over the Chinwot bridge on the fourth day. The struggle for the soul of the deceased was between the Yazat, such as the Good Vayu, Vertanya, Mitra, Srosh, Rashnu and the Evil Vayu, Astuvihad, Frezicht, Visisht, Eshma (MX 2.110-120)⁺⁺⁺⁺. In general, deities in the form of birds were considered good, while serpents and dragons were considered evil^{sssss}.

Researchers who studied seals and amulets of the Oxa civilization, not limited to dividing the creatures in the images into negative and positive categories, interpreted some images as Daeva. For example, the copper-bronze amulet found in Togolok-21 depicts a huge creature with horns, wings, tail and four legs with sharp claws, attacking a human corpse lying on the ground. V.I. Sarianidi describes the creature in the depiction in the Vendidad as "with stiff knees, a standing tail, and incessant vigilance." The most hideous creature of evil...^{*****} is interpreted as a reflection of the demon Nasu.

Also A.Sh. Shaidullaev interpreted the image of an amulet found in Tillabulok, a Bronze Age monument in the south of Uzbekistan, as a daeva⁺⁺⁺⁺. The four-legged monster in the center of the seal is depicted several times larger than the human body (corpse) with bent knees at the feet of the mythical creature. There are also images of a scorpion and three dogs in the picture, and the content of the scene represents the processes after death. In addition to A. Shaydullaev's interpretation of the four-legged creature as a daeva, we can say that in this image is expressed the task of the daeva to carry the soul to the netherworld. It seems that at this time the daeva were not rejected gods, but gods of death with terrible characteristics, such as Anubis for the ancient Egyptians, Hades for the Greeks, Pluto for the Romans, Hel for the Scandinavians. No matter how horrible the gods of death were, the fear of them on the part of believers ensured that these gods were revered as symbols of faith.

In one of his later studies, V.I. Sarianidi compared the image of a bird-man holding seven snake-dragons by his tail with Ahriman in one of the amulets from Ron Karner's Anahita collection⁺⁺⁺⁺. In addition to the fact that it is not known how and where the find was discovered, the approach of V.I. Sarianidi to the images is also inexplicable. The seven restrained dragon serpents can be compared to the seven "chief daevas" of great importance in Zoroastrian demonology. "Chief daevas" appeared in the newer parts of the Avesta, more precisely in the book of Videvdat. From this point of view, this amulet must belong to the 1st millennium BC. However, none of the Zoroastrian sources depicts daevas in the form of birds, so the assignment of the image to Angra Mainyu is debatable. Since the images of daevas are determined by their description in written sources, from this point of view, the study of their image in written sources is extremely important.

⁺⁺⁺⁺ Sarianidi V.I. Myths of Ancient Bactria and Margiana on its Seals and Amulets. – M.:Pentagraphics, 1998. – P. 11.

^{sssss} Sarianidi V.I. Myths of Ancient Bactria and Margiana on its Seals and Amulets. – M.:Pentagraphics, 1998. – P. 11.

^{*****} Сарианиди В.И. Задолго до Заратуштры (Археологические доказательства протозорастризма в Бактрии и Маргиане). М.: Старый сад, 2010 – С. 52-54.

⁺⁺⁺⁺ Шайдуллаев А.Ш. Сополли маданияти сфрагистикаси ва глиптикаси. Археология бўйича фалсафа доктори (PhD) диссертацияси матни. – Самарқанд, 2018. – Б. 55-56.

⁺⁺⁺⁺ Сарианиди В.И. Задолго до Заратуштры (Археологические доказательства протозорастризма в Бактрии и Маргиане). М.: Старый сад, 2010 – С. 11.

In the scenes of snakes and dragons fighting animals, the images of dragon-snakes rising from the ground and attacking the hind legs from the abdominal side of animals are said to represent the content of the abduction of the "seed of life"§§§§§§. The concept of the "seed of life" is one of the important mysteries of Indo-European mythology, it is represented in the ancient Greek myths by Uranus and Kronos, and in Zoroastrianism by Ahriman, who attacked Gaia Maretan (Gowmard). According to Zoroastrian cosmogony, the universe consists of three parts, the sky being the place of the Yazat under Ahura Mazda, the underworld being the abode of the main Daevas of Ahriman, and the space above being the world of struggle, inhabited by humans. Ahriman's first attacks are aimed at Gai Maretan (the bull-man) to steal or destroy the human race created by Ahura Mazda. The encounter of images of such content in material sources indicates that this myth was formed before Zoroastrianism.

In conclusion, we can say that in the Late Bronze Age of Central Asia funerary rites, belief in ancestral spirits, water, sun, fire, Chaoma, Daeva in temples, embodiment of symbols such as worship of mythical and existing animals, images of religious content on amulets and seals are a clear ritual in Central Asia even before Zoroastrianism and indicate the existence of religion based on high mythology. Material sources indicate that Mitra, Anahita, Aji Dahak, Serwar, and Gandharva were deities worshipped in emphasized faith. However, the term "proto-Zoroastrianism" cannot be applied to this belief, since no religion is named after its successor or predecessor.

It is logical to consider the term "protozoroastrianism" not as a name of religion, but as a stage in the development of religious views and the transition to Zoroastrianism from a historical point of view. Although material culture is important for understanding the peculiarities of the pre-Zoroastrian religion, it is difficult to decide the question of its name. A critical analysis of the information about the doctrine against which Zoroastrianism was condemned in the Avesta may clarify this question.

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